

# PORTUGUESE AZULEJOS AND OTHER NATIONAL ARTS

## AZULEJOS PORTUGUESES E OUTRAS ARTES NACIONAIS

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I intend to link the identity appropriation of the *azulejo* to a source common to most artistic discourse in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. I am convinced the national assumptions concerning the *azulejo* followed six phases which I have linked to different identity mutations that could be summarized as unceasing historicist approaches, which are characterological and long-term. Historicism prevailed until the end of the nineteenth century. A passion for characterological principles followed, which was conveyed by Reynaldo dos Santos with unsurpassable strength. However, when the Estado Novo's identity pattern started to decline, art historians focused on researching unchanged structures. First, traces of Portuguese originality, though ephemeral, were sought after. Second, researchers attempted to show that the *azulejo* is an expression of Portuguese sensibility which, with its ups and downs, remained throughout the centuries. Third, by inventorying and analysing, they tried to integrate the *azulejo* in the structural attributes of Portuguese art.

### KEYWORDS

**Narratives of identity | Periodisation | Characterology | Traditionalism**

### RESUMO

No presente artigo procuro integrar as apropriações identitárias do azulejo numa deriva comum à generalidade dos discursos artísticos nos séculos XIX a XXI. Estou persuadido de que as ilações nacionais do azulejo seguiram as seis fases em que divido as mutações identitárias, e que poderia resumir em sucessivas apreensões historicistas, caracterológicas e de longa duração. O historicismo preponderou até final do século XIX. Seguiu-se uma paixão pelas essências caracterológicas, que Reynaldo dos Santos exprimiu com um vigor insuperável. Quando o padrão identitário do Estado Novo entrou em declínio, os historiadores de arte voltaram-se para a pesquisa das invariantes estruturais. No primeiro caso, procuraram-se no azulejo os vestígios de uma originalidade portuguesa, ainda que efémera. No segundo, trabalhou-se para mostrar que o azulejo é a expressão de uma sensibilidade portuguesa que, com altos e baixos, permaneceu ao longo dos séculos. No terceiro, procura-se integrar o azulejo nos atributos estruturais da arte portuguesa, deduzidos por inventariação e análise

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

**Narrativas identitárias | Periodização | Caracterologia | Tradicionalismo**



National identity is a theme that often seems excessive and unnecessary. However, its historiographical repercussions are enormous. Why is it that António Ferro, so many times referred to as “Orpheus’ modernist”, uses such energy to disqualify the modern and modernism? How is it that, for the sake of national identity, we began to defend the artistic copy and argued against the originality of the 1930s? How is it possible to have so many certainties when it comes to identity in artistic matters so likely to be controversial? How did the idea

of universalism manage to cast an appearance of union to those who support and object individualism, internationalism and cosmopolitanism in art? How did we come to refuse our national artistic identity, conveyed by Leonel Moura in 1990? (Moura, 1990).

To answer these questions, I have decided to adopt a long-term historical perspective in which I seek to incorporate the *azulejo*. In a previous study, I adopted a coordinated perspective of the national artistic

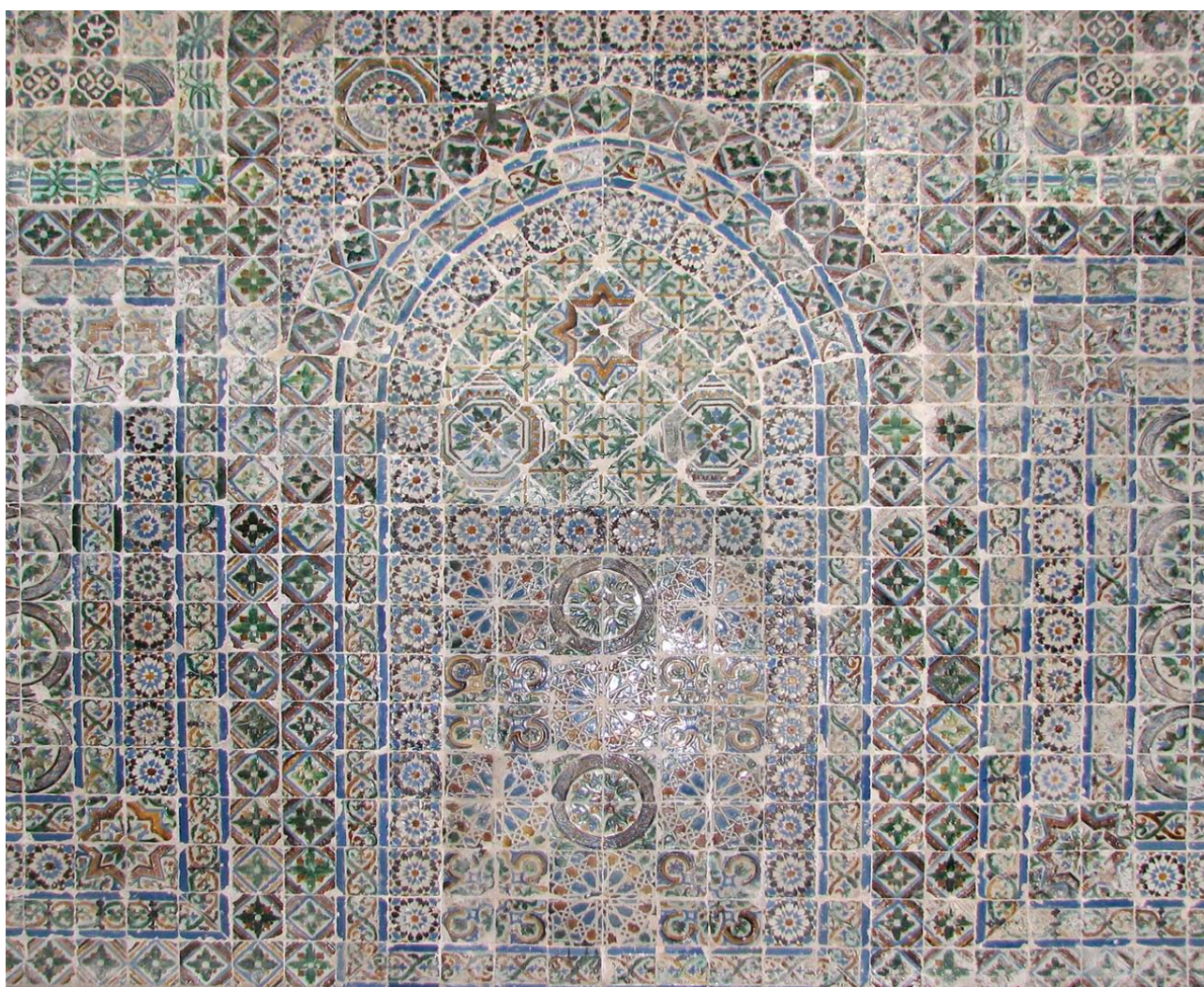


Fig. 01· Coimbra, Old Cathedral, mudejar azulejos, 16<sup>th</sup> century (photo by Francisco Queiroz/IPC)

forms from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, including in it the First Romanticism and highlighting the characterological shift that began at the end of the eighteenth-century. In this article I will begin by summing up the previously developed timeline, so I will mention some parts of the work entitled *A Deriva Nacional da Arte. Portugal, séculos XIX-XXI* (*The Origin of National*

*Art. Portugal, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries*) (Rosmaninho, 2018) and of the anthology *Artes de Portugal (1814-2013)* (*Portugal's Arts*) (Rosmaninho, 2014). The pages on the *azulejo* have never been published and may be read as a verification of all the hermeneutical possibilities of that historical perspective.

## OBJECT OF STUDY

National identity is a feeling that lives within memory and is expressed through a speech directed at establishing the homeland's originality and worth. My goal is not to *find* national art, but only to draft some kind of history of the narratives of identity stemming from art. I do not wish to decide upon whether there is a Portuguese school of painting, but to explain the

use of Vasco Fernandes' and Nuno Gonçalves' work to uphold the country's ideas of worth and originality. It is not up to me to point out the *lie* of the *Portuguese household*, but to show how it was adapted to the Neogarrett ideology and to a persistent collective imaginary.

## A TIMEFRAME FOR THE NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY

The provenance of Portuguese art in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries might be summed up in six periods. In fact, art's bond to a Portuguese identity started at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, despite some enthusiastic beliefs, at the start, national art was plagued by uncertainty concerning the possibility of Portugal reaching a collective specificity worthy of appreciation. A Portuguese national culture was a wish, a possible expectation.

The second period of provenance of national art, between 1841 and 1890, is determined by its past hopes and the primacy of an historical perspective. The pioneers of national art do not see crisis, but hope. "Romantic nationalism" rests upon the idea that culture, popular traditions, and a country's rural way of life voice a vital harmony. The hopes of a national identity lay in the past where a Portuguese school of painting headed by Grão Vasco and a private Portuguese Manueline style is greatly sought after.

In the third period, between 1891 and 1920, patriots become increasingly more assured as well as more aggravated by all that seemed foreign or inappropriate. Although to our eyes they seem thoroughly victorious, they actually felt besieged by scepticism. A great increase in identity discourse concerning art is recorded. Patriots find the theme *Portuguese household* and take rurality as a reference, cladding all subjects under a powerful and restorative characterological mantle and becoming excited by the discovery of Nuno Gonçalves' panels. The Neogarrett style underscores life in the countryside, José Malhoa's painting is brought to the fore as a legitimate representation of

the country, and the idea of a Portuguese character leads to fascinating reinterpretations of the Manueline style and the "Portuguese school of painting".

The fourth period, between 1921 and 1940, is an era of extremes: artistic nationalism grows in its fight against the international threat brought about by the avant-garde. It is a struggle that seems to sort itself out in favour of the nationalists, though the balance indicates that the supremacy of the individual would soon have drastic effects. This era begins with António Ferro, a provocatively antinationalist modernist, and ends with Fernando de Pamplona commending national architecture and the antimodernist *Exposição do Mundo Português* (Exhibition of the Portuguese World). It starts with the future director of the National Propaganda Secretariat demeaning Almeida Garrett's alleged parochialism and ends with unceasing criticism to internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Growing in strength, radical views persevere throughout the thirties and are not solved. Cultural nationalism, which had elected chalets as its prime enemy, turns against avant-garde and non-naturalistic currents or, using a broad and misleading term, against modernism. The ethnical characterology of the nineteenth century becomes an inebriant "Portuguese sensibility". As a result, modern artists felt affected by the flair and responded. In 1939, since it was neither possible to defy artistic nationalism nor forfeit an "universalist" understanding of art, a symbiosis between *nation* and the *world* was aimed at, which was in turn translated into convergent formulas: "national form", "universal content"; "national origin, universal repercussion"; individualism as a prerequisite to the universal;





Fig. 02. Vila Viçosa, Church of Santo António, patterned *azulejos*, 17<sup>th</sup> century (photo by Jorge Guerra Maio)

national art as a particular interpretation of general values. With these syntheses, modernists, who were seemingly bowing before the nation, were actually placing the individual above the collective, a fact that will become more obvious in the next decades.

The fifth phase, between 1941 and 1970, was punctuated by radical certainties about the timelessness of the Portuguese spirit, feeding Reynaldo dos Santos' powerful historiography. However, young artists grew more and more indifferent. The conflicting mood of the previous period slows down with the frantic patriots' victory and modern artists' apparent acceptance of the nation. Yet, though it lasted until the end of the *Estado Novo* (New State or Second Republic), this peace is partial and illusory. Artists gradually lost interest in identity issues, which had begun to seem repetitive, reiterative and propagandistic. Art started steering into a period in which historical obligations and identity concerns were incompatible with individual rights, where the artist's originality was above the nation's cultural particularities and creators obeyed only themselves.

After the *Estado Novo*, the nationalistic canon was weakened. In the seventies and eighties, the Portuguese artistic identity became an abject theme to the new, young artists, who were eager to free themselves from an ideological authority that still remained under a shadow cast by the *Estado Novo*. These young artists begin to give in to the allure of *internationalisation* or, to use a more up-to-date term, *globalisation*. The nationalistic speech had become more solipsistic, characterological, essentialist and disconnected from the actual work of art. New scholars who were still interested in the national perspective preferred a long-term (instead of a timeless) and comparatist view (instead of a soliloquy of values). Concerns about identity lost national activism and instead became more opened to an extra-European context. Perhaps the year that best signals the peak of indifference when it comes to the national perspective is 1990. Afterwards, a nostalgic tone started to grow and has been growing ever since; it now seems to take on the uncertain and hopeful form of a new beginning. In the twenty-first century, globalisation triggered a renewed traditional nostalgia that is changing the elements of national identity.

## GREAT HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TOPICS

If this historical perspective is correct, one will be able to find it in some of the greater themes of Portuguese art history: in the universal sense of Portuguese art; in the identity relationship it has with Spain, Flanders, Italy, Europe and Asia; in the particular interpretation of Velasquez; in Nuno Gonçalves' exemplar importance;

in originality and imitation concepts; in influence and assimilation; in inferiority and delay; in the appreciation of light and colour; in interpretations of landscape; in the antimodernist nationalistic principle; and, I believe, also in the *azulejo*.

### AZULEJO

As it is clear, identity concerns are not present in all studies dedicated to the Portuguese glazed tile – the *azulejo*. In many, on the contrary, the interest lies in the technique, the Muslim, Spanish and Dutch influences and in the historical evolution of techniques, patterns and uses. As a result, it might be of use to remember that an identity appropriation grew with the development of a patriotic feeling between the end of the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century. It should also be added that the identity framework appears as a preliminary comfort to great works or as a mean to reinforce the importance of tile art as cultural heritage.

#### Historicism, characterology and long-term

I am convinced that the lessons to be learnt from the *azulejo*'s identity followed the aforementioned phases, which could be summed up in consecutive historical, characterological and long-term concerns. Historicism prevailed until the end of the nineteenth century. A passion for characterological essences followed, which were conveyed by Reynaldo dos Santos with unsurpassable strength. When the identity pattern of the *Estado Novo* started to decline, art historians turned their focus onto researching unchanged structures. In the first case, researchers sought in the *azulejo* traces of Portuguese uniqueness, even if short-lived. In the second, work was developed to prove that the

*azulejo* is a representation of the Portuguese sensibility which, with its highs and lows, prevailed throughout the centuries. In the third, researchers tried to fit the *azulejo* into the structural attributes of Portuguese art, gathered through inventory and analysis.

The historical period is well-represented by Raczyński who, in a letter on January 16, 1845, underscored the *azulejo*'s importance for the country's identity, showing its great use in Portugal and the grander beauty of the glazed tiles produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Raczyński, 1846). Furthermore, in the article by H.B.K. (1850), published in *Art Journal* and translated in the *Revista Universal Lisbonense* (Lisboners Universal Journal) in 1950, the author highlights the value of the *azulejo* in a mediocre contemporary context.

At a time of few studies and great hopes for the development of a national identity, the thought of a Portuguese school of painting, which would leave its imprint upon historiography for a century, was coyly endeavored in glazed tiles by Francisco Assis Rodrigues, sculptor and professor at the Fine Arts Academy. The *Dicionário Técnico e Histórico de Pintura, Escultura, Arquitectura e Gravura* (Technical and Historical Dictionary of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Engraving), published in 1875, assumes that, "in Portugal, scattered throughout the kingdom, there was a school or establishment where artisans and workers, who were responsible for a great number of this type of pieces, were taught"<sup>1</sup> (Rodrigues, 1875: 67).

1. In the source text: "em Portugal alguma escola ou estabelecimento, em que se criaram artífices e operários, que fizeram o grande número de obras deste género, que se acham espalhadas por todo o reino". Henceforth all in-text translations are provided by the author.





Fig. 03. Funchal, Church of the Convent of Santa Clara, upper choir, floor with mudejar tiles, 16<sup>th</sup> century, and "chequered azulejos" (photo by Rosário Salema de Carvalho)

However, as per usual, suggestions concerning identity flowed without any firm ground. The *Grande Dicionário Português ou Tesouro da Língua Portuguesa* (*Great Portuguese Dictionary or Treasure of the Portuguese Language*) by Domingos Vieira, published in 1871, aligns the *azulejo* with two striking points of the Portuguese artistic identity: the fact that architecture is "a vital form of Portuguese art" and that this is due to "the Mozarabic genie". Since Portuguese architecture

"is distinguished by its ornamental richness, it is easy to grasp the Arab provenance of the *azulejo*"<sup>2</sup> (Vieira, 1871: 696).

When, in 1891, Ramalho Ortigão wrote about Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro's faïence, a characterological reinvention of art history had already begun precisely through the actions of the latter. In it, traditional artistic elements, including the *azulejo*, started to appear with

2. In the source text: "se distingue pela riqueza da ornamentação, é fácil de compreender a origem árabe do azulejo".





Fig. 04. Funchal, Church of the Convent of Santa Clara, patterned *azulejos*, 17<sup>th</sup> century (photo by Rosário Salema de Carvalho)

expressions such as, “of the esthetical genius of our race” (Ortigão, 1891).

The growing interest in the idea of a *Portuguese household* led to a fascinating traditional appropriation of the *azulejo* within a field that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was known as artistic ethnography. In 1904, Sousa Viterbo regarded the *azulejo* panel with its images of saints lit by a lamp, “a motive of charming ingenuity” (Viterbo, 1912<sup>3</sup>).

This shows that, within the historical identity framework, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the *azulejo* was indeed at its artistic peak. Afterwards, when ethnical characterology swept through Europe and

artistic historiography arrived, the *azulejo* began to represent a collective way of life. While popular culture was transformed into the greatest bedrock of national identity, it is possible to find in the *azulejo* the religious and naïve spirit of the people. In a key article published in 1905 and dedicated to traditional Portuguese art, Rocha Peixoto did not forget to include the “*azulejo* altarpieces” among the rural “household accessories” (Peixoto, 1905).

At this point it is important to recall that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the disbelievers in the self-sufficient value of Portuguese art, who had been sheltered by the teachings of Joaquim de Vasconcelos, were being overrun by a new generation

3. On pages 567-570, he includes the article “A casa portuguesa” (The Portuguese household) originally published in *Diário de Notícias* on September 2, 1904.





Fig. 05· Faro, Cathedral, Chapel of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Masters' Cycle (*Ciclo dos Mestres*)  
(photo by Jorge Guerra Maio)

of intellectual patriots that were able to find the Portuguese originality and distinction in everything. Yet, the skeptics, ready to highlight the Portuguese inborn neglect for art, regarded with horror the proliferation of façades covered with *azulejos*. Manuel Emygdio da Silva understood this position well. In 1909 he was grieved by "this craze to coat buildings with *azulejos* that, in most cases, are not even as embellishing as some ads"<sup>4</sup> (Silva, 1958). In his opinion, this behavior would transform "Lisbon from a city of marble and granite into a town of crockery and posters"<sup>5</sup> (Silva, 1958). It is perhaps in this line of thought that Joaquim de Vasconcelos' opinion should be considered, since, in a letter to António Augusto Gonçalves on

March 1, 1912, he objected "against Colaço *azulejos* and its Ilha dos Amores (in *azulejo*) in Bairro Alto"<sup>6</sup> (Vasconcelos, 1973).

### Traditional and antimodern convictions

In 1912, José de Figueiredo had already taken up Ramalho Ortigão's artistic patriotism and created a suggestive historiographical norm, that was full of promise. With it, the *azulejo* would increasingly become an expression of the people and of the Portuguese collective personality. As its sense of belonging to

4. In the source text: "a mania de forrar os prédios com azulejos que, na maioria dos casos, nem sequer são decorativos como alguns anúncios".

5. In the source text: "a Lisboa de "mármore e de granito" em uma cidade de «louça e de cartazes»".

6. In the source text: "contra os azulejos Colaço e a sua Ilha dos Amores (em azulejo) do Bairro Alto".



the people and to Portugal grew, which occurred relentlessly until the mid-twentieth century, step by step the *azulejo* found its way into identity discourse and became a source of convictions, including artistic ones; a weapon against the avant-garde and modernism.

The *azulejo* panel with a saint or the Virgin Mary, which was promoted by Eduardo Nunes Colares in the journal *A Arquitectura Portuguesa (The Portuguese Architecture)*, became a recurring theme in Portuguese households, and was regarded as one of the cornerstones of the “Portuguese style” worthy of being placed at railway stations, like Guerra Maio suggested in 1916 (Colares 1914; Colares, 1915; Maio, 1916).

*Azulejo’s* use as an identity insurance against foreign imports (first, the chalets; then, modernism) was incorporated into a powerful, aggressive discourse in the second half of the twentieth century. The article “Arquitetura tradicional do século XVIII” (Traditional architecture of the eighteenth century), published in 1918 in the *Revista Turismo (Tourism Journal)*, is a fine example of this, though it was in the thirties that the *azulejo’s* association with Portuguese identity was most used to achieve extreme nationalistic aims. The book *A Nossa Casa (Our House)*, 1918, by Raul Lino suggests its employment several times and praises the Portuguese sense of belonging and technical merit but is only willing to accept its dissemination if it offers a “sentimental interest” (Lino, 1918). Eleven years later, in *A Casa Portuguesa (The Portuguese Household)*, Raul Lino still acknowledged the *azulejo* as one of the fundamental morphological elements of Portuguese art and associates it with a particular way of “feeling in architecture” (Lino, 1929). This shows a victory in favour of José de Figueiredo’s characterological historiography and, ever more so, of Reynaldo dos Santos. The esteem felt for the *azulejo* was the result of a tendency to “despise the game of volumes in architecture”, the “little interest in the chiaroscuro”, the southern character of the country and an intrinsic “superficial sense” (Lino, 1929: 12).

The *azulejo’s* importance for the country’s sense of identity spread through two means in the second third of the twentieth century: in sphere of the *Portuguese*

*household*, having been set as one of the morphological elements that would make domestic architecture more Portuguese; and in the historiographical context, since the *azulejo* asserted itself as proof of the creative originality of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The book Raul Lino published in 1929 is filled with references to ancient *azulejos* (Lino, 1929). It is a retrospective view that allows supporters of the *Portuguese household* to demand “simple *azulejo* panels with sweet, protective saints, always lit by an oil lamp,”<sup>7</sup> as Mário Gonçalves Viana wrote in 1932 (Viana, 1932). The fact that these representations – of the *azulejo* and of the *Portuguese household* – became increasingly more common, though, was loathed by Raul Lino in his third book entitled *Casas Portuguesas (Portuguese Households)*, 1933 (Lino, 1933). Actually, this decade of extreme views on identity and art tended to convert glazed tiles into a vehicle that stood for Portuguese identity against the threats of cosmopolitan modernism. In a well-known article entitled “Façam-se casas portuguesas em Portugal” (Make the houses in Portugal Portuguese), published in January 1939, its anonymous author regrets that the tile coating of façades has been forbidden but that there is no attempt to stop the surge of foreign-looking buildings that “are nothing more than poor, artificial plants pretending to perfume gardens”.<sup>8</sup>

In the journal *A Arquitectura Portuguesa (The Portuguese Architecture)*, where this short piece was published, there was a fierce campaign against modernism in favour of a *Portuguese art*. In June 1939, the article “Portugal lá fora” (Portugal abroad) firmly states that a feeling of Portuguese identity cannot be obtained without the employment of “ancient traditions” such as the *azulejo*. In the same edition, a few pages onwards, this number – then at the height of the antimodernist campaign – considers the *azulejo* a primordial resource that would allow architecture to be made Portuguese again. “Our classic and so often incredibly beautiful *azulejos*” would have the power to make “modern buildings” more Portuguese (“Azulejos portugueses”, 1939). In 1941 Raul Lino’s outcry against “a sea of small rooftops, *azulejos*, bollards and balconies”<sup>9</sup> eloquently illustrates how the *azulejo* was employed

7. In the source text: “ingénuos painéis de azulejos com doces santos protectores, sempre alumdiados pela lâmpada de azeite”.

8. In the source text: “não passam de pobres plantas artificiais a fingir que perfumam jardins”.

9. In the source text: “chuvada de beiralinhos, azulejos, pilaretes e alpendrôides”.





Fig. 06. Lisbon, patterned azulejos, 19<sup>th</sup> century (photo by Jorge Guerra Maio)

by a generally traditional, patriotic and antimodern taste, which may have continued to grow for as long as the modern architects of the fifties kept using glazed tiles in new ways (Lino, 1941).

It was in this midst of patriotism that the *azulejo* became common in detached houses and Reynaldo dos Santos extracted historiographical conclusions. Because of him, the claim that *azulejos* were linked to identity reached a superlative level. In a conference given in 1941 about "Art's spirit and essence in Portugal", Reynaldo dos Santos explained why the *azulejo* "achieved a logical and original ornamental form" and "is one of the wonders of the creative power of Portuguese decorative art"<sup>10</sup> (Santos, 1943). This line of thought finally developed a definitive structure in 1957.

In the work *O Azulejo em Portugal* (*The Azulejo in Portugal*), a scholarly analysis prevails most chapters, but the introduction – conceived to define a critical bibliography and expose the author's wide historical views – describes the intrinsic originality and worth of the Portuguese *azulejo* (Santos, 1957). "Variety", "continuous renewal", "the vitality of its decorative instinct", "great dissemination", "absolute coherence" and "national autonomy" are some of the attributes highlighted by Reynaldo dos Santos. The Portuguese glazed tile of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered an unparalleled "variety of features, evolutionary renewal and broad ornamental view"<sup>11</sup> that could not be found in any other country.

10. In the source text: "alcançou uma expressão decorativa lógica e original" "constitui uma das glórias do poder criador da arte decorativa portuguesa".

11. In the source text: "a variedade de aspectos, a renovação evolutiva e a ampla visão ornamental".



## The engine of invariants

Side by side with the traditional splendour of the *Portuguese household* and Reynaldo dos Santos' spiritual momentum, modern architects felt compelled to reject oversimplification and establish their creative rights. The struggle against the *Portuguese household* is also a struggle against "the tiny *azulejo* panels", as Francisco Keil called them (Amaral, 1947). However, this state of affairs would also lead to the *azulejo*'s reinvention in Portugal. Thriving art historians of the seventies, who nonetheless rejected Reynaldo dos Santos' patriotic epistemology, were forced to recognise the "*azulejo*'s persistence" (Silva, 1993) and "the flow" of the decorative arts' own behaviour, even in periods of greater tendency towards internationalisation, such as D. João's (Serrão, 2001: 223-224).

The search for unchanged artistic structures stemmed from Reynaldo dos Santos' wide-ranging vision, which was nevertheless devoid of the author's spiritual and patriotic tone. Portuguese originality was, to Reynaldo dos Santos, a product of the Portuguese collective personality. The scholars who followed him (and sought to deny him) looked for originality in the consistency of forms, but were left without a driving force that would help explain these structural consistencies. That is why, even without a patriotic speech, characterology always emerges, albeit discretely, as the cause of the forms and *taste* that endure throughout the centuries.

Therefore, we can now understand why José Meco, in 1985, started the book *Azulejaria Portuguesa (Portuguese Tiling)* with a categorical statement concerning the national originality of this art in its forms as well as purposes (Meco, 1985). In addition, he conveyed an idea that would help establish the patriotic speech developed at the end of the nineteenth century, which was later taken up and amplified by Reynaldo dos Santos, that is: the strength of external influences is lesser than that of a country's collective personality that absorbs everything and suits it to its ways. Regarding the *azulejo*, the following statement

is equivalent to José Meco's, who, full of ontological certainty, claimed, "The ability to absorb the most diverse elements, without losing its personality, added to the genesis of the Portuguese *azulejo*"<sup>12</sup> (Meco, 1985: 6), a thought no one verbalized better than Reynaldo dos Santos.

Identity purposes also arise when the scholarly aim is replaced by the need to offer a quick and comprehensive perspective of the Portuguese *azulejo*. In these cases, the researcher must, even if unwilling, outline general ideas to standardise five-hundred years of history in the geographical area we call Portugal. This is what happened in 1986 when José Meco highlighted the *azulejo*'s originality, expressivity, complexity and persistent use as well as its economic, social and cultural suitability. Yet, the swiftest way to convey these ideas is still, as it was in Reynaldo dos Santos' time, to consider the *azulejo* "a personality trait, a sign of the Portuguese creative vitality and difference"<sup>13</sup> (Meco, 1986).

## The hermeneutic of transculturation

The catalogue of the 2005 exhibition on *A Arte do Azulejo em Portugal (Azulejo's Art in Portugal)* is guided by the same characterological lines, since it considers glazed tiles "one of the most original contributions of the Portuguese genius to Universal Culture" and an eloquent illustration of "the Portuguese practical intelligence and sensibility" (Henriques *et. al*, 2005). The post-colonial context we are in no longer allows us to have an expansionist interpretation of Portuguese culture, so the *azulejo* has tended to appear in the last decades has a vehicle to the much appreciated "cultural encounters".

The remarks this catalogue makes concerning the *azulejo* as "supporting tolerance between exoticism and sensuality" underline characterology's renewed use ("swift practical sense", "the values of sensuality"), which is intersected with artistic deductions fashioned after José de Figueiredo (the Portuguese preference

12. In the source text: "Contribuiu para a génese do azulejo português a sua capacidade de absorção dos mais variados elementos, sem perda de personalidade" (Meco, 1985: 6).

13. In the source text: "marca da personalidade, da vitalidade criativa e da diferença portuguesa".





Fig. 07. Trafaria Praia, 2013, motor-driven passenger ferry (1960), cork covering and furniture, 1430x750x3010 cm; *Great Panorama of Lisbon (21st Century)*, 2013, Viúva Lamego hand-painted, tin-glazed ceramic tiles on a sandwich-structured composite panel, 220x6000 cm; *Valkyrie Azulejo*, 2013, handmade woollen crochet, felt appliqué, fabrics, ornaments, polyester, LED, power supply unit, dimensions variable. Douro Azul, Porto (photo by Luís Vasconcelos/Cortesia Unidade Infinita Projectos)

for “colourful material, mirroring light” and for the “description of real life”) and laid at the service of principles that contradict old patriotism (“the ability to fuel dialogue with other peoples, which is made obvious by the preference for Exoticisms”). The resources concerning identity, which were arduously conceived at the end of the nineteenth century, are reused to praise Portugal’s importance. However, because it is no longer possible to stress its utter predominance, the dialogue between cultures is treasured, that is, Portugal’s weight in “the universal context of artistic creation”,<sup>14</sup> namely through the *azulejo* (Henriques *et al.*, 2005: 9).

Despite the efforts to make research more objective, it seems we cannot become detached from the subjectivism and spiritualism that derive from the use of concepts like *genie*, *personality*, *taste* and *sensuality*, even if subjected to the hermeneutic of *transculturation* (Henriques *et al.*, 2005: 19).

## The void of globalisation

In the last couple of years, in which the deceptions of globalisation and the economic crisis helped produce a new patriotism, the *azulejo* was once more entangled in a diaphanous search for national identity. Indeed, the transformed *cacilheiro*<sup>15</sup> created by Joana Vasconcelos to represent Portugal in the Venice Biennial exhibition in 2013 illustrates that semblance of a new beginning. In the interview granted to *JL*, the artist accepts both her Portuguese identity and internationalism, she wants to be Portuguese but also belong to the world (Vasconcelos, 2013). The *azulejo*, with all its Portuguese peculiarities and universal coating qualities, is yet again involved in a kaleidoscope of references regarding identity. The latter tend to be avoided due to the lingering fears inspired by the memory of the *Estado Novo*, but at the same time it cannot be entirely freed from this kaleidoscope because of the void of globalisation.

14. In the source text: “no contexto universal da criação artística”.

15. Translator’s note: *cacilheiro* is the Portuguese term used to identify the boats departing from Cacilhas, Almada, that cross the Tagus River and connect the north side to the south side of Lisbon.



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